

2013 DEC 11 AM 10:17 Testimony of Kathryn J. Whitmire

City and County of Honolulu Council

Opposition to Bill 69 – Advertising on Buses

December 11, 2013

Members of the City Council, I welcome the opportunity to add my testimony in OPPOSITION to Bill 69 which would allow advertising on buses. My name is Kathryn Whitmire, and I have been a resident of the City and County of Honolulu since 2001. I live in the town of Haleiwa on the North Shore of Oahu. Before moving to Hawaii, I served as Mayor of Houston, Texas, from 1982 to 1992 which gave me many opportunities to address issues related to public transportation and also to appreciate the value of the scenic environment. From 2000 to 2002, I chaired the Board of Directors of Scenic America, the only national organization dedicated exclusively to preservation and enhancement of scenic resources, and from 2003 to 2008 I served on the Board of Directors of The Outdoor Circle here in Hawaii.

As you know, Hawaii is one of only four states in the United States that have no billboards.

There are three points I would like to emphasize regarding the proposal to allow advertising on buses:

- Large advertising signs on public transportation vehicles amount to “moving billboards” which detract from the visual environment in the same way that billboards on the roadside do.

- Public transportation vehicles which present an appealing image encourage ridership and public support for the transit system.
- Hawaii's scenic beauty is a very valuable economic asset which should not be risked by policies that encourage the proliferation of outdoor advertising.

Advertising Signs on Buses Create an Eyesore in the Urban and Rural Environment.

Since the State of Hawaii has had the foresight to prohibit off-premises advertising signs along its streets and highways, it may be easy to forget how much billboards can detract from the beauty of the city and countryside. However in many cities across the U.S. (including my original hometown of Houston), the clutter became so ugly that it threatened the strong business climate. As a result, in the past 30 years, hundreds of cities on the mainland have passed ordinances prohibiting construction of additional billboards within their city limits. Shortly after Houston passed such an ordinance, the Board of the Metropolitan Transit Authority recognized that the "moving billboards" which then existed on its buses were detracting from the community effort to improve the visual environment. Therefore the Board adopted a policy in September 1982 to eliminate advertising from all buses and replace it with an attractive graphics design. This program was well received by the community and the bus system experienced substantial growth in ridership during the following years. Then in 1993 the Board expanded its policy to prohibit commercial advertising on any transit authority property stating that "the absence of commercial advertising on transit facilities and rights-of-way improves the appearance and encourages greater public acceptance and use

of transit facilities and services and more effectively incorporates the transit system into neighborhoods”. In 2004 when Houston’s long-awaited light rail system began operation, the Board’s existing policy prohibited any advertising on the light rail cars. Although there have been many proposals to reconsider this policy in the intervening years, it remains in place and contributes to the scenic environment in Houston.

While I understand that there are many differences between Honolulu and mainland cities like Houston, I do think that the objectives of developing a strong effective public transportation system and protecting the beauty of our urban and rural environment here on Oahu can both be accomplished by keeping billboards off of the buses.

Hawaii’s scenic beauty is a valuable economic asset that should not be put at risk.

In Houston, the control of billboards and improvement of the visual environment has become a significant business issue. During my tenure as Mayor, Houston faced the need for economic diversification and rebuilding the local economy after the downturn in the oil industry cost the community thousands of jobs. The Greater Houston Partnership (which includes the Houston Chamber of Commerce) recognized at that time that the continuing billboard clutter was a negative factor in the effort to attract new business and economic growth. Consequently in Houston the business community is a strong advocate for the reduction of outdoor advertising.

It seems to me that the same dynamic exists in Honolulu. Hawaii’s beautiful landscape at one time became cluttered with billboards, but laws were passed many decades ago to protect Hawaii’s beauty for future generations of residents as well as

visitors. Passing and enforcing laws that protect the visual environment recognizes that the beauty of this island is an important economic asset which benefits us all.

Bill 69 is a step backward because it authorizes a new form of outdoor advertising to mar the environment. I urge you to oppose Bill 69.

If I can provide any assistance or further information on this issue, please call me at 226-9612 or 293-1111 or email me at Kathyjwhit@aol.com. Thank you.